

The purpose of this paper is to outline the fundamentals of a literature review and how this could be practically applied to help inform strategic priorities.

The aim of a literature review is to increase understanding through wider evidence of the main published literature in relation to a specific topic or field. A literature review should always be guided by the aims and objectives of the piece of work in question, be it a report or health needs assessment. Similarly local analysis intended to compliment a literature review should be guided by the outcomes of the literature review – e.g. a literature review that found that men are at greater risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection than woman, would ideally include local analysis that accounted for variation between sexes.

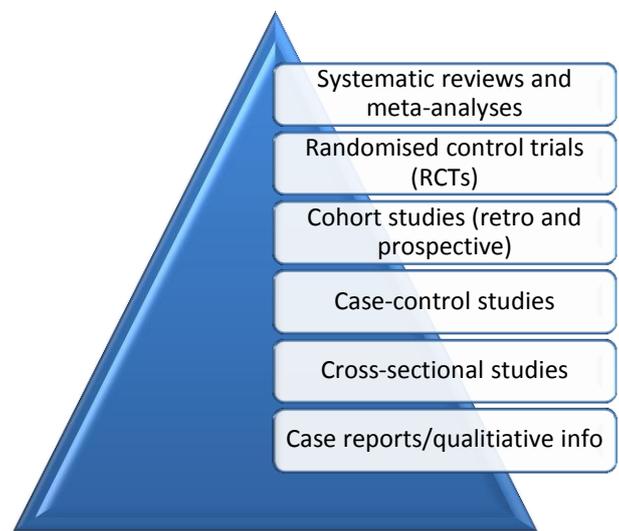
Identifying a common language

Peer review – Peer review is the evaluation of work by other people of similar competence to the producers of the work (peers). Peer review methods are employed to maintain quality, improve performance and provide credibility. In academia, scholarly peer review is often used to determine an academic paper’s suitability for publication. Ideally a literature review should include sources that have been peer reviewed.

‘Gold Standard’ – A good literature review should consider the hierarchy of evidence shown in Fig 1. The top of the pyramid indicates the most robust data sources available, with less precision and certainty heading towards the base of the pyramid. Often capacity and timescales do not allow for a literature search which includes all study designs. As such, critical appraisal of reputable grey literature (research produced by organisations outside of traditional academia) and the sources referenced within is warranted.

Mixed methods – It should be noted that although qualitative data is less robust; the

Figure 1: Hierarchy of evidence



Source: Adapted from: Guyatt, G.H., Sackett, D.L. Sinclair, J.C. et al. 1995. A method for grading healthcare recommendations

quality and richness of information that it supplies can be extremely useful in service re-design. Problems may arise when decisions are based solely on this information as it is the voice of a few, often opinionated and engaged individuals, who may not be representative of the population. A mixed method approach that combines robust quantitative numbers with qualitative texture is advised where possible.

Critical appraisal – Neither grey or academic literature should be treated as FACT! Critical appraisal of all data sources is required

when conducting a literature review. The following appraisal tools are useful for some study designs and can be applied to grey literature as well:

- **CASP** checklists (mix of study designs): <http://www.casp-uk.net/#!casp-tools-checklists/c18f8>
- **CONSORT** checklist (RCTs): <http://www.consort-statement.org/>
- **PRISMA** checklist (systematic review and meta-analyse): <http://www.prisma-statement.org/>
- **STROBE** checklists (observational studies) : <http://www.strobe-statement.org/index.php?id=available-checklists>

Grey literature search – Figure 2 outlines examples of data sources that could be included in a literature search. There is a health bias in this example and other agencies may apply to your work area. Finding the original source of key references within the grey literature is advised. The idea is to start broad to provide context and direction and then to filter the literature search/review down to the main aims of the piece of work. The content should influence local quantitative and qualitative data analysis as well as final recommendations. Fig 2 is a suggested bare minimum literature search; a more comprehensive search is encouraged.

Academic literature search – NICE provide a repository of journals and databases which are publically available or available through NHS Athens: <https://www.nice.org.uk/about/what-we-do/evidence-services/journals-and-databases>.

NHS Open Athens gives access to Healthcare Databases Advanced Search (HDAS) and databases such as OVID, ProQuest, EBSCO and

BMJ and AMA collections. Locally NHS Athens access is available to NHS and Public Health staff through South Devon Healthcare Library Service. Please speak to the KIT team if you are unable to register for an Open Athens account.

Health need/impact assessment – The literature review could be two-prong, including a review of health needs (particularly in the absence of local data) as well as a review of evidence based interventions designed to improve the health outcomes of a specific population. Again the literature review should influence the analysis and final recommendations of the assessment.

Figure 2: Minimum grey literature search

